you need to become a polymath (or get replaced by machines)

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if you're anything like me, you've been told your whole life that success requires focus. pick a thing, learn it for years, do it for the rest of your life. that's crap.

you've been there too. you have multiple interests, but feel guilty to pursue any of them instead of focusing on your speciality: your job, your studies, your income.

every hour you spend doing something that doesn't translate directly to your job feels alike waste.

then I realized this feeling of guilt is not only invalid, it also holds you back from transforming yourself into a more capable version of yourself.

the people doing the most interesting work aren't single-sighted at all. they do all sorts of things.

- Naval writes about philosophy and invests in startups.
- Graham painted, programmed, and funds companies.
- Charlie Munger built his investment empire on mental models stolen from biology, psychology, math, and physics.
- Feynman won a Nobel Prize in physics while picking locks, playing bongo drums, and drawing nude portraits as a hobby.

these people didn't succeed despite their interests, they succeeded through them.

you might think being a polymath means being superficial in various skills, I used to think that too. but I will explain why this is so far from the truth.

I don't consider myself a polymath. I try to be.
I think I still have a much longer way to go.
but I tried my best to learn from the people who do.
and this article is a distillation of what I found valuable.

Why the "pick one thing" advice aged poorly

your parents' advice to "keep away from distractions" worked for them, and for their parents too.

it stems from the ultimate goal of the educational system: **to train machines to fill in specific jobs**.

the system never cared about making you whole as a human, with all your various interests. all it cared about was molding you into a brick to fit into a society of a million other bricks.

this system was designed to mass-produce workers for stable jobs. and it worked for decades.

as you might have noticed, it no longer does.

the thing that made specialization safe was predictability.
study accounting,
get a job,
work for 40 years,
building your life.

but we're not living in 1970s.
this is the age of AI, and as cheesy as that might sound, it's no less true.

when entire industries evaporate within a decade,
when knowledge grows exponentially each year,
when AI eats everything,
predictability is just as real as a unicorn.

Now consider what AI is. it's ultimately a machine to recognize patterns and reproduce them with insane speed.

feed it enough examples of anything and it will be able to perform it.

specialists are no different. they are pattern-performers. that's literally their job. only they perform at a fraction of the speed of your favorite LLM.

specialists are literally training their own replacements, sometimes without even realizing or consenting to it.

Why multi-interested people get trapped

so if having multiple interests is an advantage, why do so many people struggle with it?

it basically comes down to 3 factors:

- **the framework problem:** most productivity gurus assume you have a single goal.
  "What's your goal for your next 10 years?"
  "what's your north star?"
  these questions don't fit a multi-interested brain.
  so you either pick one thing and ignore the others (and feel betrayed by yourself) or avoid commiting to anything.

- **validation problem.** when you tell people you love philosophy, and mechanics, and poetry, they look at you as someone who has no idea what they want.

- **the quality gap.** it's unfair. people with multiple interests have unique taste across multiple domains.
  but taste develops much faster than ability.
  so they try to create, only to fail by their own standards.
  the imposter syndrome kicks in, and you feel like a fraud.

none of these are your flaws. they are solvable problems.

What you need to master as a polymath

three things matter here. most people have one, almost none have all.

1. **Range with depth:** skimming though is easy, but going deep is hard.
   the goal isn't to know a little of everything and check off the box,
   it's to know enough about several things,
   enough to be useful to you.

2. **Developing the eye.** you've been there too. you think something is excellent without being able to fully explain why.
   this is trainable. usually what makes something extraordinary isn't a single thing, it's a set of exceptional multidisciplinary skills that come together to build a perfect software, movie, or game.

3. **Fueling your own engine.** most people cannot move a single finger without being told how.
   schools make sure you are an obedient machine,
   and they work hard on this for 18 years.
   the alternative is finding gigantic problems worth solving and going after them without permission.

even perfecting one of these categories will be life-changing. combining them together will make you unstoppable.

The game behind games

there are infinite paths to follow for life. start an agency. become an employee. get into crypto.

but these are all games with specific rules and people to follow them and win by replicating already existing solutions.

but there is a game at play behind all of them. **a meta game.**

the meta-game for people of multiple interests is:
→ **learn to make things,**
→ **attract people who want those things,**
→ **and articulate why those things matter.**

that's it, everything else is a variation of it.

you can write books, start a youtube channel, build your app, but it all comes down to this single meta-game. the underlying structure remains the same.

why is this important for scattered minds like yours?
because each element requires different set of skills.

building requires technical skill.
attracting requires psychology and distribution.
articulating requires persuasion and communication.

specialists can do one of those things (e.g., build great software). they either fail at the rest, or completely rely on other specialists to make a whole system work.

Your unfair advantage

what makes you you as a person is a specific combination of things you've absorbed.

someone who studied economics, played competitive chess, obsessed over painting will produce different work from someone who studied biology, played jazz, obsessed over Chinese history.

those combinations are the point. nobody else in the world has your combinations.

that's your true, unique, unfair advantage.

but these combinations only translate to output through action.

having interests means jack shit.

producing work that reflects those interests is everything.

With AI, you'll either adapt to this, or go poof

AI is coming for every specialty. the grim reaper is knocking on every door and walking out with bloody hands.

coding, marketing, law, sooner or later will be affected.

but what it lacks is the unique human-specific strings that keep those different specialities attached.

the real treasure is the person who understands enough about law and business and human behavior to know which legal question to even ask.

the person who understands enough about medicine and statistics and patient psychology to understand what the diagnosis means for a specific case.

you get the point.

look at what's happening with software right now.

just a few years ago you'd need a team of multi-talented individuals and a ton of budget just to make a fully functional app, let alone the marketing, etc. that went into selling it.

the technical barrier is cracked more every day.

but writing code has never been the real barrier.

the apps that actually succeed aren't the ones with the best code,
but the ones with someone who understood design well enough to make it feel swift,
copywriting well enough to explain the value in a glimpse,
UX well enough to remove the hassle,
pricing well enough to squeeze more out of the poor pockets of customers,
and marketing well enough to find the right people.

as software will move to smaller and agile teams, being perfect at writing Rust will not get you far, but being fully functional with 10 different skills will definitely.